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# WILLIAM CHAMBERS

An Address Delivered at the Celebration  
of the Jubilee of



## THE CHAMBERS INSTITUTION

PEEBLES

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BY

ANDREW CARNEGIE



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IT is indeed a great privilege to be permitted to share in to-day's proceedings; a congenial task to speak here, in his native town, of the great and good man in memory of whom we this day assemble. William Chambers was born here, the home of his forebears for many generations, on the 16th of April 1800.

The family fell into straitened circumstances, and removal to Edinburgh became necessary in 1813, where they settled in humble apartments. William, alas! had to be taken from school, his intended course of education abandoned; to work he had to go; only the younger brother of eleven could be maintained at school. In Edinburgh our hero soon read everything that could be read—for nothing—at the booksellers' windows and the stalls surrounding the College and the High School, and was a constant visitor at the evening book auctions. Bent upon becoming a

printer, he made several applications for a situation as apprentice in booksellers' shops, unsuccessful until upon one occasion, returning from Leith, which he had visited to answer an advertisement for a grocer's apprentice, having almost given up hope of ever getting among books, his eyes caught, in the window of a small bookseller's shop, those welcome and seemingly providential words, 'Apprentice Wanted.' Accompanied by his mother, his guardian angel through life, he promptly visited the shop, and soon entered upon his five-years' apprenticeship. On the 8th day of May 1814, when he had just reached the age of fourteen, he began to earn his living. One wonders what his career might have been had not a kind fate conducted him at last, after several disappointments, to the printer's shop, among books, as he so longingly desired.

In August, the following year, when the family left Edinburgh, he remained and took lodgings. Never a moment of despondency was permitted. For one good reason, inspired as he always was by his mother's advice and animated by her noble example of uncomplaining meekness, all trials were boldly met and all overcome. She was, in his own words, 'the solace of my existence.' He tells us that he read Franklin's biography, and that enabled him to face all difficulties with proper resolution. Many young men have endured priva-

tions and achieved success from the example of that great man, Franklin, and many are to be in turn similarly inspired by the memoirs of the Chambers brothers. Young Chambers lived upon threepence-halfpenny a day, neither tea, coffee, nor sugar allowed, not even new milk. (In an aside Mr Carnegie said—My little daughter, who had heard me saying this, came to her mother and said, ‘I don’t know. I am not sure that I could live on threepence-halfpenny a day.’) Resuming his address, Mr Carnegie said: For years after he began business he limited his expenditure to sixpence per day. Fortunately, the kind fates had decreed he should be a total abstainer in his youth. He touched neither tobacco, beer, wine, nor whisky. It is notable that at the annual soirees of Chambers brothers’ employees in after years liquors were absent. His landlady assured him that eating was just a use; ‘it was wasteful and ridiculous to consult the palate, as it all came to the same thing after the food got through the mouth. Probably there is more truth in that doctrine than we are prone to accept. His principal food was the national staff of life, oatmeal, and there we know he could not go wrong. He never asked any one, not even his parents, for a penny; the respectable relatives of his mother residing in the town, he did not approach. He was proud, and had faith in his

star. His apprenticeship was severe, his master inconsiderate, but his heaviest grievance—what do you imagine that was? He was condemned to be sent often on his travels with as many as three hundred circular letters eulogising the State lotteries. Yes, within a century, this religious, civilised land of Scotland tolerated these agencies of demoralisation. It also fell to his lot to paste on the posters in big letters, ‘Twenty thousand Pounds still left in the wheel,’ and other seductive announcements.

Many a time did he question how he could get rid of this slavery. Fortunately the word in season was at hand. On the doorway of a house he passed several times each day was carved the inscription, ‘He that tholes overcomes,’ and this, engraved upon his young heart, sustained him. That this truth proved his refuge in many trials through life may be inferred from his having it carved in stone here above the entrance.

No friends like old friends! No truths like those burned into the heart of youth. To the good, earnest, self-respecting youth, fighting the battle of life nobly, the kind fates provide moral sustenance at every turn. Morley has just told us how six lines from Burns have influenced the political thought and action of the world. Never can I forget what I owe to six words from that same great teacher, which fortunately



burnt themselves into my conscience in youth and remain with me in old age: 'Thine own reproach alone do fear.' There sits a judge it is impossible to deceive. The pessimist looks upon the present and loses heart—so much misery, so much that is saddening; he mourns over the degeneracy of our race. Let him look backward and note the conditions prevailing even last century, and compare them with those of to-day, and rejoice. The most consoling of all facts, and that which reconciles us to the evils of our day, is the fact that conditions have so greatly improved and are so rapidly changing for the better, and that man is bound to continue improving—retrogression impossible. Thus we can harbour the consoling thought that all is well since all grows better.

Chambers determined to remedy the defects of his school education. He rose therefore at five and read till it was time to go to work. He read many sound books, taking copious notes, and kept record of all his expenditures, not allowing a single halfpenny to escape. I must mention an extraordinary incident. He made the acquaintance of a baker in Canal Street who was passionately fond of reading, but without leisure for its gratification. He asked our young hero if he would come at five o'clock in the morning and read aloud to him and his two sons while they were preparing their batch

—his reward to be a penny roll every morning newly drawn from the oven. The proposal was too captivating to be resisted. Behold him then before five o'clock in the winter mornings marching across the town to the baker's shop and downstairs into the cellar to his task. In all history I question if there be a parallel to this. Success in life was assured, for in the bright lexicon of such youth, which fate preserves for honourable manhood, there is no such word as fail! Along with Newton and his apple, Franklin and his kite, Galvani and his frog, Tell and his bow, Washington and his cherry-tree, Bruce and his spider, ranks Chambers and his bap, with this difference in favour of our modern hero—all is cold, unvarnished fact; yes, the truth that is stranger than fiction.

Our foremost living oratorical eulogist has proclaimed Johnson the 'typical John Bull.' I commend for your consideration whether Chambers be not the 'typical Scot'—in every essential feature—the product of a Scottish home of honest poverty, the Scotch mother standing out in all her heroic and saintly qualities 'in the tried perfection of her old age.' The two brothers, then boarding together, walked five and a half miles to their parents' home on Saturday nights, carrying the few things that must be washed and prepared by the devoted mother for next week, in time to be taken back with them early on Monday morning. The re-



peated admonitions of the father were to seek independence, to work for no man after apprenticeship was over, but to strike out for themselves, no matter what privation this might for years entail, as independence would be better in the end. The mother's repeated charge was always to remember who they were and avoid low companions. These were the counsels which made them good men, and 'kept them from all sense of sin or shame.'

The father at last broke down completely, and all was left to the mother. Of course, she rose to the occasion. One Saturday night in the darkness, at his mother's bedside, after the funeral of his father, Chambers heard her plans; she would start a small shop; and this she did and triumphed. When was the typical Scotch mother ever known to fail when her children needed guardianship?

At nineteen Chambers's apprenticeship ended, and he decided to follow his younger brother by setting up a book-shop, which Robert had been enabled to do two years previously with the books of the family library as a basis. William was compelled to find other means. Fortunately, a London book agent asked him to assist in arranging books for a sale in Edinburgh, and was so favourably impressed by the youth that he asked about his position. This being explained, he promptly offered him, unsolicited, a choice of books from his own selection to the value of ten pounds, upon long credit.

Here again appeared the Fairy Fortune. The goddess has a habit of appearing to a certain class of young men, but she is not blind, as is supposed. No keener eye ever beamed than that of this so-called blind and fickle goddess. She has the inner vision, and beams keen upon merit, ever helping those who first help themselves, thus proving themselves worthy of her guardianship. Chambers borrowed the hotel truck, and wheeled his entire stock-in-trade to the small shop in Leith Walk. I hope it still exists, and has a tablet upon it. This incident, which gave him capital on credit, our hero declares to be 'the turning point in my life.' 'I never regard trifles,' says the so-called practical man. Neither would the philosopher, if he were not so wise as to know that mortals have no means of divining what is a trifle in the mysterious drama of life; but this is always to be kept in mind, though a flash reveals the angel of destiny, there must lie the needful qualities in the man she shines upon to reflect the rays and assure her that the virtues are there—that she has found the pure gold. Chambers's long years of self-denial, faithful service, the indomitable will, all lay within him and left their mark, which created the favourable impression upon the agent, just as the younger brother's interview with the Great Magician impressed Scott, and gave him deserved recognition at last. The right hand of fellowship is ever

much readier to be extended to the truly deserving than is believed, and the exceptionally earnest, faithful, and competent young man has within himself magnetic power which attracts friends anxious to aid.

The first year in business established Chambers, and he removed to a larger shop, where he actually had space for a sofa in a back room, which served for a bed; a small press was purchased, and the printing of books was added to their sale, a small pocket edition of the Songs of Burns being the first venture. He relates that the pleasure he had in setting these up led him to singing them aloud over and over as he went forward. Happy the man who sings at his work, especially the songs of Burns! The edition netted nine pounds profit. Then came various additions, among others a lending library department, and at last, in 1832, appeared *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* with its record-breaking sales. This was an original conception, first of its kind to present to the masses at small cost useful knowledge in attractive form, free from political or sectarian bias. The old business was relinquished; a delightful union was formed by the two brothers, and there appeared the firm of W. & R. Chambers.

The good seed they first planted continues still in our day to be sown broadcast over Scotland, yielding bountiful harvests of good fruit. Proud

boy was I when, at school in Dunfermline, at twelve years of age, our teacher handed me occasionally a copy of *Chambers's Information for the People*, and asked me to read to the class some gems therefrom. Wise teacher, thus to select the pearls found outside of school-books and lay them before us. It says much for the work of the two brothers and their descendants now in charge, that *Chambers's Journal* continues to occupy the proud place which, as pioneer in the field, it so rapidly won, and that it is still in the family, and still *Chambers's Journal*. The publications of the firm, as a whole, have no rival as far as I know, either in Scotland or elsewhere. The 'Educational Course,' which embraced science for the masses for the first time, *Information for the People*, and *A Miscellany of Useful and Entertaining Tracts*, the *Encyclopædia*, and last, that which, like the brook, still goes on for ever, the *Journal*. These treasures constitute a mine of wealth such as has never been bestowed by one family upon any nation. Great and unpayable is the debt, constantly increasing, which we owe to the two brothers and their descendants. May I be permitted also to say that I know no book more valuable for youth than the memoirs of these typical Scots? Its perusal makes the Scot prouder than ever of his native land, because although, as he reads, he knows that in degree as types these brothers are of the foremost, yet he remembers also

that there are thousands of humble homes in his land from which are to come men and women possessed in varying degrees of similar virtues and abilities. With surprisingly few exceptions, neither from palace nor castle has Scotland, or indeed any country, obtained its foremost citizens, its greatest workers for good, but from such humble homes as that with which the Chamberses were blest—yes, blest. It is indeed

From homes like these auld Scotia's grandeur springs,  
That makes her loved at home, revered abroad.

The acquisition and disposition of wealth in our day is a problem in which we are all already deeply interested, and are to become more so. The lives of men like Chambers confirm us in the opinion that mere wealth in itself is of little importance; it is not the wealth, but the use we make of it, that is vital. It is a serious question whether wealth in youth be more desirable than poverty; whether it is better that men should begin the life of a Chambers or that of the millionaire's child; whether hereditary wealth is best either for the individual or for the State. I have been accused of assisting to make many millionaires in dollars. Forty odd are charged to my account—a fearful responsibility indeed; but there is this consoling reflection. In America, as in all lands of our English-speaking race except the dear Motherland, it is the custom



to distribute wealth equally among the children, and the widow has her proportion by law. There being no law of primogeniture and entail or settlement, an aristocracy of wealth cannot be established, for wealth left free is rapidly scattered. The saying in Yorkshire, 'three generations from clogs to clogs,' is translated in America into 'three generations from shirt-sleeves to shirt-sleeves.' From my experience I know this is a true saying. We have little wealth remaining in American families for more than three generations of heirs, and that in only a very few cases indeed. It scatters considerably, as a rule, in the first generation of heirs, greatly in the second, and during the third it vanishes, and the heirs of the millionaire return to lives of strenuous labour, a much-needed reformatory school, and one of the best.

I cannot but believe that it is best for the nation as a whole that wealth should thus be allowed to pass freely from rich to poor, unimpeded by legislation, all left to the free-play of natural forces, the spendthrift getting rid of the burden he cannot use well, the poor man acquiring it by strenuous exertion, self-denial, and useful service, after the fashion of the Chambers brothers. Our experience in the newer land of America is that millionaires' sons as a rule do not compare well as valuable members of society with their fathers, nor even with those compelled to earn their livelihood by



honest labour; and as for the millionaires themselves, so far as my knowledge of that class extends, few are happy in old age. While they have more than enough to retire upon, they have neglected to provide themselves with something precious to retire to. It is a serious matter to advise them to retire from business, for none can be happy who have not followed the Chamberses' example, and never failed to interest themselves in higher things. Millionaires who laugh are rare, very rare indeed.

In early days how a man was born was the test. In recent times how much wealth he owned has been threatening to displace that standard. Disraeli records that a millionaire in Britain must rank as a personage: in our day it is rather how much a man knows, for knowledge is power; and there is much to be said for this, for, as Mr Balfour constantly reminds us, it is upon scientific research and the knowledge and inventions flowing therefrom that the progress of our race in the future depends. But the day is coming when the test will be neither how a man was born nor how much wealth he possesses, nor even how much he knows, but how he has served his fellows—what has he done to make the world or the little spot where he was born a little better than he found it? Not how well he has served himself, but how well he has served others. Towards this advance we have in

Chambers a pioneer. His surplus wealth was not used for self.

You, citizens of his native town, have what is probably the first institution of its kind bestowed by a private citizen. It was a delightful surprise when I heard of this institution and found the pioneer giver a fellow Scot. Twenty-five years after him, as his humble disciple, I founded a similar institution in Pittsburg. The library, because all that man has ever wrought or taught, worthy of remembrance, for the advancement of our race, is recorded in books, which Carlyle so finely calls the People's University; the picture-gallery, where art, which beautifies and refines life, plays its part; then the museum, capable of interesting and instructing the young in one department of nature's miracles; the music-hall, with its noble organ—a noble quartette.

This son of honest poverty, out of his own hard-won earnings, presented to his native town such original and wise proof of his love for the place of his birth, and made such wise use of his wealth, thus transmuting his surplus material gold, mere dross in itself, into the imperishable things of the spirit. Nor was this his only gift. His restoration of St Andrew's Tower at a later date was another proof of his enduring love of Peebles. To Edinburgh, to which he was so deeply attached, and of which he had been Lord

Provost, he performed noble service by restoring St Giles'.

We may infer his internationalism from the twelve flags of the leading countries here displayed by him, including that of the youngest of all, the Republic, where the other branch of our race is carving out a destiny not unworthy of the Motherland. The Republic had no stauncher friends than the Chambers brothers in her day of trouble. Our race draws closer and closer together—blood is becoming very much thicker than water, betokening co-operation in the near future; I believe for the world's good. As our race abolished private wars, so we may hope it may soon proclaim to the world that national wars shall cease; as no man is permitted to-day to sit as judge in his own cause, so no nation shall be. Nations, like men, must live under international law.

Chambers teaches us all the needed lesson for living this life well. Especially am I his debtor and humble follower, and I visit Peebles to-day that I may pay tribute and acknowledge my deep indebtedness for the lesson that surplus wealth is to be considered only as a sacred trust, which the possessor is bound to administer as trustee for the good of his fellows, and this tribute I pay him, firm in the faith that the day approaches when he who hoards his wealth or bequeaths it in inordinate amounts to one or more of his family

will die as one unfaithful to his trust, unwept, unhonoured, and unsung.

The Chambers brothers have become part of our national heritage as pioneers in a branch of service destined to grow in importance as our race ascends—the spreading of knowledge among the people. Enduring fame is theirs. No list of Scottish worthies is complete which does not give prominent place to these great sons of Peebles.

Not what we have, but how we use,  
Not what we see, but what we choose,  
These are the things which mar or bless  
The sum of human happiness.

Not as we take, but as we give,  
Not as we pray, but as we live,  
These are the things which make for peace,  
Both now and after time shall cease.

Such is the lesson William Chambers taught. Here, assembled this day to honour his memory in this noble structure, his gift to Peebles, from which radiate the influences for the uplifting of the people, thus teaching us that though dead in the flesh he still liveth in the spirit among you, let us resolve to follow his example.